INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

To research his 1978 essay “Giving Good Weight,” John McPhee, one of our era’s most celebrated writers, took an unusual approach. He worked for several months on a farm. From spring through fall, much of the farm’s produce was trucked into New York City and sold in open-air farmers’ markets. One of McPhee’s jobs was crating onions. He describes that task in the following excerpt from the essay that first appeared in *The New Yorker*:

> After thirty minutes of filling boxes, my arms feel as if they have gone eighteen innings each. I scarcely notice, though, under the dictates of the action, the complete concentration on the shifting of the crates, the hypnotic effect—veiling everything else in this black-surfaced hill-bordered surreally level world—of the cascade of golden onions. Onions. Onions. Multilayered, multileveled, ovate, imbricated, white-fleshed, orange-scaled onions. Native to Asia. Aromatic when bruised. When my turn is over and a break comes for me, I am so crazed with lust for these bulbous herbs, these enlarged, compressed buds—that I run to an un-harvested row and pull from the earth a one-pound onion, rip off the membranous bulb coat, bare the flesh, and sink my teeth through leaf after leaf after savory mouth-needling sweet-sharp water-bearing leaf to the flowering stalk that is the center and the secret of the onion. Yash at the end of the day will give me three hundred pounds of onions to take home, and well past the fall they will stand in their sacks in the corner of the kitchen—the pluperfect preservers of sweet, fresh moisture—holding in winter the rains of summer.

If you’d like to read the entire essay, you’ll find it in *The New Yorker’s* online archive.

Just as McPhee celebrates the onion, we should celebrate his writing—its imagery, syntax, diction, tone, rhythm, etc. Using every means available, McPhee creates and communicates his experience of the onion. We can taste it.

Creating and communicating—that is the work we will do in this course.

McPhee, like all good writers of any stripe, attends to his craft. That will be our preoccupation as well. Consistent with that endeavor, this course is designed to help students meet the following objectives:

1. understand the craft of writing, including concision, diction, grammar, and syntax;
2. begin mastering a particular genre of creative or professional writing;
3. critique peers’ work to assist their fellow writers and improve their own revisions;
4. write convincingly about the art of creative writing—how it is made and why it endures.
While objectives 1 and 3 will occupy the majority of our time, we'll spend important moments with objectives 2 and 4.

Specifically, this course will help you develop the following competencies:

1. the ability to distinguish between work that is creative and work that isn’t
2. the ability to write with a specific audience in mind
3. the effective management of narrative
4. the effective use of figurative language and literary devices such as imagery, metaphor, and symbolism.

TEXTS

_Telling True Stories_, edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call

We'll use this book regularly.

_The Elements of Style_, William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White

In her essay “On Style,” editor and writer Emily Hiestand writes, “I offer the following thoughts with some trembling because on the matter of defining great style, even the master E. B. White must say, “Here we leave solid ground.” Indeed, my first and most confident suggestion is: Keep Strunk and White’s _The Elements of Style_ ever close at hand.

_The New Yorker_ (student print and digital subscription that comes with a classy tote bag at no extra cost)

_Notae Bene_: Good writers read habitually. They immerse themselves in language used with force and aplomb. For this and other more direct reasons, I ask you to purchase a 12-week subscription to _The New Yorker_ (available to students for a slim $6.00). I would like you to get in the habit of reading the magazine. Every day, I would like you to read one essay, article, story or poem. Unless you share your reading experience with me or the class, I will have no way of knowing that you have taken my suggestion. Of course, I could casually ask you about your reading (hmm, that’s a sneaky good idea). Experience tells me that budding and blossoming writers write better when they’re reading good stuff. _The New Yorker_ publishes good stuff. And the cartoons are wonderful.

We will use _The New Yorker_ as a model for our own web-based magazine, _The New Wilmingtonian_, that the English Department is eager to launch. The work that you do this semester will be considered for publication in the magazine.
METHOD OF INSTRUCTION

Grammar

Every skill relies on a foundation. For writing, grammar provides that foundation. Grammar serves as language’s organizing principle. Without a solid understanding of grammar, you will be prone to embarrassing mistakes. Worse, however, is the fact that you will be exiled from the pleasure and power one gains from knowing how the language works.

With those thoughts in mind, I am requiring you to take a grammar proficiency examination. In order to receive a grade higher than a C- for this course, you will need to score at least an 85 out of a possible 100 points on a proficiency examination. If you do not receive an 85 or better on your first attempt, you will have two more opportunities to improve your score.

Workshop & Participation

Since there will be very few lectures, this course depends on your participation. Therefore, you must be prepared to share your knowledge, your creations, your analyses, and your impressions with the rest of the class.

Regularly, you will be submitting drafts of your work to be considered in a workshop format. Each student will have at least one draft considered by the workshop during the semester.

Our discussions of drafts will be substantive—and not trivial or mean-spirited. Here’s an example of a trivial comment: “I like this paragraph. It’s so nice.” And here is an example of a mean-spirited comment: “This paragraph is worthless. It’s just a bunch of sappy clichés.” And, finally, here’s the kind of comment that would be most welcomed: “I think this paragraph is frightening. I mean it has frightening images, and that’s weird, because its sentences are delicate and beautiful. Can we talk about the tension between what’s frightening and what’s beautiful in this paragraph?”

So, your first responsibility is informed, thoughtful participation. It counts for a whopping 15% of your grade. You cannot participate effectively unless you have completed all of the reading and writing assignments in advance of the class in which they will be discussed.

Over the course of the term, you will several 4 short pieces of nonfiction (between 500 and 1000 words each) and one longer piece (between 1500-1800 words). And, you will draft one ungraded poem.
GRADES

Final grades are based on the following percentages:

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<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Assignment 1</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Assignment 2</td>
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<td>Writing Assignment 3</td>
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<td>Writing Assignment 4</td>
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<td>Long Story</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
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POLICIES

All assignments are to be submitted electronically as email attachments in WORD.

You must attend class. More than three unexcused absences will result in the lowering of your grade by at least one full step.

Come to class on time. Consistent tardiness will be counted as unexcused absences.

Cell phone and laptop use are not permitted in class without my permission. If you are using your phone or laptop in class without my permission, that day will be counted as an unexcused absence, you will be asked to leave the class, and your participation grade will suffer. Count on it.

Giving the impression that someone else’s ideas or language are your own is unacceptable. If you plagiarize knowingly, you will fail this course.

A DETAILED, BUT TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

(Since this is the first iteration of this course, I’m experimenting. That means that the schedule could change. As my sagacious high school speech teacher advised, “Better to be an extemporaneous fool than a premeditated ass.”)

Jan 14      Introduction to the Course

**Homework, Due January 17 by 9 pm.** Email me your document as a Word attachment. Do not send me a PDF.

You will have a short non-fiction piece appear in the food section of *The New Wilmingtonian*. Here’s the assignment. Tell a true story in 10 engaging sentences, totaling between 130 and 150 words, about a specific food available in New Wilmington. Do not write about an entire cuisine, such as Mexican or Italian food. Rather, write about a specific dish, such as lasagna, French toast, or shrimp fried rice. Or, write about a specific ingredient, such
as salt, lentils, or lard. Indicate where this food may be found in New Wilmington. Organize your 10 sentences into an effective narrative (story). Be creative. Do research. Talk to people. Do not use clichés. Do not waste words. Be precise with your choice of verbs and nouns so that you do not become dependent on adverbs and adjectives. The magazine wouldn’t lie about the word minimum and maximum.

Jan 16  Discussion of the following articles in The New Yorker (note, you will need to have subscribed to magazine to have access to these stories):
“The Food Babies of Instagram” by Paige Williams
“The Reddit Forum that Guesses Who You Are Based on What’s in Your Fridge,” by Helen Rosner

Come to class with any questions you have about pages 1-11 in Elements of Style.

Jan 18  Workshop
Writing Assignment #1 Assigned, Due January 28

Jan 21  MLK, Jr. Day, No Class

Jan 23  Practice Grammar Proficiency Exam

Jan 25  Prepare for this class by reading the following essays in Telling True Stories:
“Stories Matter” by Jacqui Banaszynski, pages 3-6
“Finding Good Topics: An Editor’s Questions” by Jan Winburn, pages 22-24
“Being There” by Anne Hull, pages 39-45
“Reporting on Your Own” by Mitra Kalita, pages 48-51
“From Story Idea to Published Story” by Cynthia Gorney, pages 55-59
“(Narrative) J School for People Who Never Went” by Adrian Nicole LeBlank, pages 59-62

And, from Elements of Style, read pages 66-69.

For each essay and for the section from Elements of Style, write two or three sentences about what you found to be the most important, interesting, helpful, or inspiring idea about writing. Be prepared to read aloud what you have written.

Long Story assignment introduced (Topic ideas due by Feb 6, Draft of opening 500 words due before you leave for Spring Break, final draft due before Easter break)

January 28  Grammar, Review of Elements of Style, pages 11-14
Writing Assignment #1 Due

Jan 30  Prepare for class by reading the “Goings on about Town” section in the __________ issue of The New Yorker.
Writing Assignment #2 (Goings on about New Wilmington) Assigned, Draft Due February 3 by 9 pm

Feb 1   Grammar Review

Feb 4   Grammar Proficiency Exam

Feb 6   Workshop

Feb 8   Workshop

Feb 11  My father’s birthday. I miss him. We’ll do something fun.

Feb 13  Writing Assignment #2 Due
        No class meeting

Feb 15  Read Part IV, “Constructing a Structure,” of *Telling True Stores* (pages 97-121). For each of the essays in the section, write two or three sentences about what you found to be the most important, interesting, helpful, or inspiring idea about writing. Be prepared to read aloud what you have written.

Feb 18  Continued discussion of readings

Feb 20  Read Part V, “Building Quality into the Work,” of *Telling True Stores* (pages 125-159). For each of the essays in the section, write two or three sentences about what you found to be the most important, interesting, helpful, or inspiring idea about writing. Be prepared to read aloud what you have written.

Feb 22  continued discussion of readings

Feb 25  Discussion of readings from *The New Yorker* to be announced

Feb 27  continued discussion of readings

Mar 1   Writing Assignment 3 assigned, Due March 20. Subject: Ilya Kaminsky reading

Mar 4   Discussion of readings from *The New Yorker* to be announced

Mar 6   We will not meet at our regular time. Rather, you are required to attend Ilya Kaminsky’s reading at 7pm Berlin Lounge.

Mar 8   Discussion
        Long Story Draft (first 500 words) due

Spring Break
Mar 18  Workshop
Mar 20  Workshop
      Writing Assignment 3 Due
Mar 22  Workshop
Mar 25  Workshop
Mar 27  Workshop
Mar 29  Workshop
Apr 1   Read Part VII, “Editing,” of *Telling True Stores* (pages 197-223). For each of the essays in the section, write two or three sentences about what you found to be the most important, interesting, helpful, or inspiring idea about writing. Be prepared to read aloud what you have written.
Apr 3   Continued Discussion
Apr 5   Discussion of readings in *The New Yorker* to be announced.
Apr 8   Continued discussion
Apr 10  Poetry
Apr 12  Poetry
Apr 15  Poetry
Apr 17  Poetry
      Long Story Due
Easter Break
Apr 23  (Mon. Classes Meet) Writing Assignment 4 assignment, Due May 3. Subject: URAC
Apr 24  Since URAC will be the subject of your assignment, you are required to attend one or more events.
Apr 26  Workshop
Apr 29  Workshop
May 1   Read Part IX, “Building a Career in Magazines and Books,” of *Telling True Stores* (pages 264-287). For each of the essays in the section, write two or three sentences
about what you found to be the most important, interesting, helpful, or inspiring idea about writing. Be prepared to read aloud what you have written.

May 3  Continued Discussion
       Writing Assignment #4 Due

Final Period:  A Reading of Excellent Prose